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Effectiveness and relevance of feedback in Higher Education: A study of undergraduate students

Abstract

This paper draws upon a wider study on assessment in higher education. It focuses on students' perceptions of the effectiveness and relevance of feedback in regard to assessment methods and self-regulation of learning. In total, 605 undergraduates participated in the study from five Portuguese public universities. Data were collected through questionnaires with open and closed-ended questions. Results revealed that feedback is perceived as more relevant, effective and in a more positive way by students who are assessed by learner-centred methods than by those assessed by traditional methods. Also, participants who are assessed by learner-centred methods or mixed methods perceived feedback as more effective in all phases of self-regulation learning than students who are assessed by traditional methods. Implications of the findings for feedback and assessment in Higher Education are discussed.

Keywords: feedback, assessment, self-regulation, learning, higher education

Introduction

A growing body of literature in higher education shows that feedback is a key feature of the assessment process that contributes to enhancing the quality of students' learning (Weaver, 2006; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Lizzio and Wilson, 2008; Price, Handley, Millar, and O'Donovan, 2010; Evans, 2013) and to promoting important changes in the classroom (Gaertner, 2014). The ways in which students look at feedback and the learning environment in which feedback occurs influence the impact of assessment on learning (William, 2011). Effective feedback on assessment is considered to be an important tool to improve learning (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, and Litjens, 2008) and needs to be recognised and understood by students and teachers (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling, 2005). If feedback is to be effective it must be timely, relevant (Ramsden, 2003) and suitable to the context (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Earlier studies show that the effectiveness of feedback may be compromised by different factors: modularization and semesterisation of the courses (Gibbs, 1999); fewer tasks (Boud and

Molloy, 2013); the university policies that aim essentially to measure the achievements of the students instead of a continuous improvement of students' learning (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, and Rust, 2011) or the workload and the assessment practices used by the staff (Weaver, 2006). The new trends on assessment emphasise the use of practices centred on the learner, based on diverse forms of assessment (Heywood, 2000; Pereira, Flores and Niklasson, 2015) and continuous feedback (Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2005), enabling the self-regulation of learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). The self-regulation of learning promotes an effective learning and motivates students to use feedback in order to regulate and improve their work (Orsmond, Maw, Park, Gomez, and Crook, 2013). For that reason, the assessment tasks should be developed in order to enable effective and sustainable feedback (Carless, Salter, Yang, and Lam, 2011). Nevertheless, more empirical work is needed regarding students' perceptions of feedback and its impact on teaching and learning (Poulos and Mahony, 2008) as well as the kind of feedback used and its impact within the context of traditional and learner-centred methods of assessment (Flores, Veiga Simão, Barros and Pereira, 2015) and the usefulness of the feedback (Small and Attree, 2015). The purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions of effectiveness and relevance of feedback in relation to different assessment methods and self-regulation of learning.

Feedback and assessment methods in Higher Education

The methods used to assess students' learning may vary from context to context and within each field of knowledge. However, regardless of their focus, assessment methods influence and determine different approaches to learning (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens, 2005; Sambell, McDowell, and Brown, 1997). Earlier empirical studies suggest that students' preferences for different assessment methods depend on their nature (Birenbaum and Feldman, 1998; Sambell et al., 1997; Sambell and McDowell, 1998; Weurlander, Söderberg, Scheja, Hult, and Wernerson, 2012). Sambell et al. (1997) concluded that students prefer other assessment methods rather than the traditional ones because they stimulate learning and understanding, as opposed to traditional ones that promote memorisation. The so-called alternative methods of assessment have emerged in higher education context (Struyven et al., 2005) based on different conceptions such as "Learner-Centred Assessment" (Webber, 2012). Webber (2012) explains that methods centred on the learner such as projects, work in groups or oral presentations foster

collaboration and feedback. Other authors also emphasise the need for these assessment methods to be aligned with a formative perspective based on continuous feedback enabling self-regulation of learning (Flores et al., 2015; Carless, 2006; Carless et al., 2011; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Yorke, 2005; Espasa and Meneses, 2010). Struyven et al. (2005) highlight the advantages of the non-traditional methods as they enhance the quality of learning and understanding instead of memorisation. Existing literature shows that self- and peer assessment stimulate critical thinking and deep approaches to learning (Segers and Dochy, 2001) and that portfolio enables greater involvement of the student and more consistent acquisition of knowledge (Slater, 1996). Furthermore, learner-centred methods are considered to be fairer regarding learning and assessment (Flores et al., 2015) as they assess skills that are also valued in other contexts (Struyven et al., 2005).

In a classroom environment based on a formative assessment all learning tasks are likely to be assessment opportunities that enhance students' learning (Ruiz-Primo, 2011). In this context, receiving feedback is crucial for learning as it influences the ways in which students make sense of it and use it to self-regulate their learning with implications for academic achievement. Accordingly, in higher education contexts a more learner-centred teaching has been advocated with a stronger focus on students (Cornellius-White, 2007). Students are viewed as active constructors of knowledge and managers of their learning process in order to meet the competences required of them in a given training programme (Huba and Freed, 2000; Meyers and Meyers, 2014). Feedback is, then, of paramount importance as it fosters the communication between the teacher and the students and it is seen as an opportunity to learn and to foster the regulation of the learning process (Poulos and Mahony, 2008; King, Schrodtt, and Weisel, 2009). However, Hattie and Timperley (2007) are critical of the fact that the assessment practices used provide less feedback than it would be desired. According to the authors, these assessment practices are designed for accountability purposes rather than for feedback purposes.

Feedback and self-regulated learning

Feedback is seen as a key element in quality teaching in so far as students learn quicker and in a more effective way when they are aware of what they have to learn and to do to improve their learning (Carless, 2006; Hounsell, 2003; Ramsden, 2003; Tunstall and

Gipps, 1996). When feedback is linked to the productions of students in order to improve their learning, it is seen as a key strategy for students to do better (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Fernandes, 2005; Santos, 2008). It will have an impact on the future students' performance (Wiliam, 2011) and guide them in order to overcome their mistakes and to learn in a more significant way (Menino and Santos, 2004). However, to provide feedback is not enough if the development of relevant learning strategies and the involvement of students in the learning tasks are to be developed (Chu, Jamieson-Noel and Winne, 2000). Other important variables need to be taken into account such as the kinds and nature of feedback, the assessment methods and the guidelines provided to the students to undertake the learning tasks. Students appreciate to receive feedback about their performance and knowledge (Craddock and Mathias, 2009; O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2001; Blair, Wyburn-Powell, Godwin and Shields, 2014). However, feedback is not always effective (Price, Handley, and O'Donovan, 2008) leading to students' dissatisfaction (Price et al., 2011) which may be related to problems of content and interpretation of feedback (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton, 2001). Recent literature shows the existing gaps on feedback effectiveness. In a review on assessment feedback Li and De Luca (2014) found that feedback is not always used by the students. Other studies show that although feedback given to the students may be significant (Jessop and Maleckar, 2014), it is not always synonymous with valued feedback to them (Blair and McGinty, 2013). Crisp (2007) also found that feedback is not fully used by the students, especially if the grade received was satisfactory. However, the study by Small and Attree (2015) found that the feedback given is valued and used by the students even if the grade has been satisfactory (Small and Attree, 2015). The timing of feedback is also an important key feature, since if it is not timely it may become irrelevant to the students (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002). Some of these conditions may lead to an ineffective feedback that fails in terms of learning support (Price et al., 2011).

Shute's (2008) review proposes guidelines to feedback effectiveness: 1) feedback should focus particularly on the task itself, not on the student, producing answers to improve the students' performance (what, how and why); 2) feedback should not discourage learners or even produce comparisons; and 3) when feedback is given it should be taken into account the type of learning that is occurring (immediate feedback for hard tasks and delayed feedback for simple tasks). Also Gibbs and Simpson (2002) identified the conditions in which feedback influences learning. Among other conditions it is proposed that feedback should be regular, detailed, on time, relevant, and focused on the learning

process and on students' performance. Price, Handley and O'Donovan (2008) also claim that for feedback to be effective it has to have a clear purpose, clear standards and being helpful for students' professional future.